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ABSTRACT

Interviews with teams of teachers at two Australian technical and further education (TAFE) institutes (the Lawson Institute of TAFE Motor Mechanics and the Franklin Institute of TAFE Disability and Aged Care) were used to examine the theoretical and practical tensions experienced by TAFE teachers when making assessment judgments within the original competency-based training paradigm and according to the assessment criteria incorporated into training packages. Both teams stated that assessment judgments are not simple, consistent, reliable, or reproducible. The study established that individuals and teams were making judgments within a social and historical context and that a range of problems must be solved during the judgment process. The Lawson staff freely acknowledged that individuals in the team apply differing standards when assessing students. Team members appeared proud of their own professional standards, and most believed that their practice of assessing students differently prepares students for the "real world," where standards vary markedly. The Franklin staff members were distinctly committed to being a strong team that consciously works through issues together and seeks to have a collective response. The unit of judgment at Lawson was the individual teacher, whereas at Franklin, the unit of judgment was the team. (Contains 11 references.) (MN)

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It's a judgment call ... and consistency isn't all it's cracked up to be

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Judgement has become a significant area of interest in philosophy, rhetoric and popular culture (Beckett 2000; Hager 2000; Smith 1999). The need to make a 'judgement call' is often acknowledged with a sense of pride, almost as an affirmation of the worth of the speaker, an antidote to the alienation of the individual in the postmodern world (Sloop 1998). What then of the experience of technical and further education (TAFE) teachers in making assessment judgements in the post-curriculum age? Do they experience assessment judgements as autonomous and professionally empowering events? How do we prepare teachers to make good judgements? What sort of professional practices sustain wise judgements? This paper will explore these questions by providing some glimpses into the judgement experiences of two teams of TAFE teachers.

This study deals with the theoretical and practical tensions experienced by teachers making assessment judgements within the original competency-based training (CBT) paradigm and according to the assessment criteria incorporated into Training Packages[1]. On a theoretical level there has been widespread debate regarding the essential ambiguity or otherwise of documented units of competence and assessment criteria (Jones 2000). Numerous authors have indicated that the Training Packages and the associated Assessment Criteria provide 'thin' frameworks for delivering courses and making assessments of skill, let alone knowledge and understanding (Mulcahy 2000). The raison d'etre of national Training Packages is to ensure that valid, reliable and reproducible assessments are made in industry and on campus from Broome to Burnie. This is clear in the following extract from the ANTA[2] website.

Why use a Training Package?

> Training Packages provide your employees with qualifications which are recognised nationally. This means an individual who gained their qualification in Cairns has the same qualifications as a person who trained in Ballarat. A recognised qualification is therefore a guarantee that the skills of the employee (or potential employee) are:
>
> - formally recognised
> - consistent nationally across the industry or industry sector.
>
> (ANTA website: http://www.anta.gov.au/tp/)

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The implicit value of 'consistency', particularly in assessment, is constantly emphasised in Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) documentation (see Appendix One). The concept of national qualifications both depends on, and promises to deliver, this notion of consistency.

However at a practical level, teachers work in the '... gulf between precept and practice ...' (Brown 2000). They navigate between the 'tick and flick' mythology surrounding competency based assessment versus the reality that CBA[3] requires a

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high degree of '... interpretation and judgement'.[4] The roadmaps provided to teachers, the documented competency standards and assessment criteria, equip them with very thin descriptions of the assessment judgement process. On the other hand, the lived experience of making assessment is a thick, social experience. Organisational and personal history and culture, the teacher's 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998), all provide a context within which teachers make judgements. Consequently assessment judgements vary between individual assessors within providers, let alone between providers and across state borders. This paper will explore assessment judgements made within two 'communities of practice' or groups of teachers to illustrate and tease out some of these issues.

Methodology

The interviews reported here are part of a larger group of long, semi-structured interviews with teachers and assessors in public and private providers and in industry. The interviews were transcribed and subjected to reflective and critical analysis to develop working hypotheses on the nature of vocational education and training (VET) practice in making assessment judgements. Analysis of six initial interviews suggested several themes that seemed worthy of further investigation. The social context in which assessment judgements were made appeared to be a particularly important factor informing decision making and assessment of competence. To further explore this theme, subsequent interviews were conducted with clusters of participants who worked together. Several interviews were also conducted with participants who, by the nature of their work, were forced to make assessment judgements in professionally isolated situations. In this paper we shall examine the stories of two teams: the Lawson Institute of TAFE Motor Mechanics teachers and the Franklin Institute of TAFE Disability and Aged Care teachers.

Lawson Institute of TAFE Motor Mechanics team

The Lawson Motor Mechanics team is located on a campus that was formerly a stand alone, mono-purpose college. It is situated in a manufacturing area with high a migrant population and high youth unemployment. The staff members interviewed were bitter about an enforced amalgamation, five years previously, which they regard as a takeover by Lawson...

> Our formal meetings ... which we have about once every three weeks ... we get together and have a big fat whinge generally at management, about how they're not doing their job, and how if they were doing their job, our job would be a lot easier. And because we've been taken over by Lawson we seem ... personally I call it ...we are the little brother of the relationship ... and it all happens up the road, nothing gets done down here ... We believe that head office[5] is taking all the cash ... **Shane**

The mood is cynical and depressed. Whilst I was interviewing, an administrative officer came around to do a room check for PETE[6] room occupancy statistics, eliciting instant resentment. Student numbers have been constantly falling in recent years, resources have been cut back and each informant alluded to literacy as a huge barrier to learning.

> ... and there was two heads of department and three or four SDAs[7]. In the last eight years that's dropped from two heads of department down to one program coordinator. We've gone from 22 to probably 13 staff ... 8,10, 6,

> probably 14 staff. So the number of staff have dropped, the number of apprentices have dropped from 110, 120 I suppose, down to motor mechanics have 48, the electricians have twelve, that's 60, so there's been a great drop. We've lost, over the last two months; we've lost two extra staff, because of natural attrition. One guy took a VDP[#]. **Shane**

The campus is still basically a mono-purpose automotive facility at a distance from the multi-disciplinary main campus. The staff tend only to have regular contact with each other and their students. They don't see much of management who are mostly on the main campus. They teach in adjacent classrooms or team-teach in one room; they have regular 'smoko' and lunch breaks together sitting around one large table in a staff room. Many of them have done this for more than ten years whilst their numbers and the numbers of students have shrunk.

> Our institute from our point of view is money driven. Get the people in, get the money in, so we can show a profit at the end of the year. Whether it's good or not so good for the apprentices is debatable but the managers say yeah you've done a good job. We've made hundreds of thousands of dollars of profit, so fantastic. Yet we feel it's a sausage factory, sausages in, sausages out. **Shane**

Franklin Institute of TAFE Disability and Aged Care team

The Franklin Institute City Campus team was suggested as an example of a team with a strong commitment to professional practice. Franklin has five campuses formed by a series of amalgamations and restructures. The City Campus Disability and Aged Care team is about to be reorganised as part of yet another restructure. The staff will remain physically close in a shared office but the two courses they teach will be allocated to different departments. Most of them already teach small loads in other departments - now everyone's load will be spread. Their office is on the third floor of a busy multi-storey building located near a fashionable retail precinct. The interior of the building is painted traditional 'TAFE' grey, but there are cheerful pictures and ornaments in the offices.

The team consists of three contract teachers: *Felicia*, *Maggie* and *Mercedes*, and one sessional teacher (not interviewed) and their coordinator, *Jane*, who is about to leave teaching for a management job in human services. *Felicia*, *Maggie* and *Jane* have worked together for a long time: five years or more. The Certificate III in Community Services (Aged Care Work) that they teach together is also taught on another Franklin Campus, Rural Campus, located about 30 kilometres away.

> ... it means that that team of people will be split ... reasonably significantly. Disability stays here and Aged Care goes, and people's positions will be sort of half here and half there, so ... yeah, it will be interesting to see how they work team wise. I think geographically people will stay together, but it's really about where your allegiance is departmentally, and I think that can be quite fragmented, fragmenting really. **Jane**

Consistency in making assessment judgements

For both teams assessment judgements are not simple, nor are they consistent, reliable or reproducible. It is clear that individuals and teams make judgements within a social and historical context and that a range of problems need to be solved

during the judgement process. The experience is thick and socially redolent, The act of making an assessment judgement also has ethical and tacit dimensions forming the gel in which the whole judgement process is solidified for the practitioner. Members of the Motor Mechanics team at Lawson demonstrated a kind of rugged individualism in their attitude to making assessment judgements. They freely acknowledge that individuals in the team apply differing standards when assessing students. Not only is each member proud of his/her own professional standard but most told me that their practice of assessing differentially prepares students for the 'real world', where standards also vary markedly.

> The teacher who, not normally teaches there, signs off ... completes that module with the kid. There's very little time, very little opportunity, for me to go back and retest those students. There is no place in our system for it. So only the kid that's finished half a job will I retest or go back and have a look. So a lot of kids are now realising that Mr Lauder's in the class, we'd better finish it all before he comes in. They go 'are you in the next session?' They go you beauty because I set the test a little bit harder. **Shane**

> Well, we've discussed it, but we've all got different standards ... some say nah ... I've had a student working for three days and they must know the entire ... **Darren**

> The day you walk through the door I start to judge you, whether you like it or not you will be judged by me, and to my standard. Now whether that's a right thing or a wrong thing to do, somebody somewhere along the line is going to ring up and say what do I think of you? And I can only judge you on how you behave in this room ... **Bruce**

> All the teachers are different and maybe some are a little bit soft and maybe some are a little bit too hard, but then again, that's the nature of where they're going to work in the real world too. They're going to run against people who are hard ... and fussy and they're going to come across people where the other person's more mild and a little more ... that, provided that it's not too far the other way and the person's just marking them off for nothing – and that's happened ... **Bruce**

The Franklin staff are distinctly committed to being a strong team that consciously works through issues together and seeks to have a collective response. It is very important to these teachers that they agree on decisions like assessment judgements. The team discusses differences of opinion and individuals are prepared to make considerable compromises in order to reach consensus. Their assessment judgements are consistent within the team.

> Well I can't remember a time when we didn't actually work something out ...I mean I might not have been altogether OK about it or someone else may not have, but I think that we actually come to some conclusion about it, yeah, but we agree really... **Felicia**

In comparison with Lawson where the unit of judgement is the individual teacher, at Franklin the unit of judgement is the team. At Lawson, inconsistency in making assessment judgements occurred between individuals; at Franklin it occurs between teams. The Franklin City Campus Team is aware that the content and underpinning philosophy of the Certificate III in Community Services (Aged Care Work) as they teach it differs from the approach used by their colleagues at the Franklin Rural

Campus. The City team follow a community-based model of Aged Care, whilst the Rural team support a clinical model. This difference in approach originated in the differing employment histories of team members on the two campuses. The teachers in the City team come largely from a community development background, whilst the members of the Rural team have been nurses and other paramedical workers.

> ... look I think a lot of it is about the original group of people whoever they were I suppose, and who we then employ and we tend to employ people to match our original group. So it would be unlikely, just as an example, the Aged Care area here in this area tends to have a bit more of a community based approach to aged services in some of the other areas, you know even other colleagues in another campus tend to take a bit more of a medical model approach because they're primarily the nurses who worked in that area ... so we would be reluctant to or unlikely to get someone who has a strongly medical model approach to Aged Care to work in our area, 'cause its not the approach that we take so it's ... you know, wherever that started I suppose ... **Jane**

Despite the amalgamation that brought these two teams into the one institution, there has not yet been any attempt to resolve the differing educational approaches of the two groups. This occurs to the extent that they acknowledge that assessment judgements may differ between the two teams of teachers.

> I guess the sorts of things we would want to come out of one of the Aged Care modules is that people would need to have an understanding of the broader sociological implications of aging I guess, and that doesn't need to be on any deep academic level but that broader thing of where ageism fits in. Why there is ageism. Why older people are treated the way they are, so that from our perspective we think that that's important that people know that so that when they work with people in a nursing home they can actually have an understanding of all this marginalised group of people and they are being removed and why is this here and why are people treated in that way, there's restraint and all sorts of things that happen to people and that's not just about ... maybe the [Rural Campus] people may well talk about the medical ...
>
> about how inappropriate that was and that *medically the correct treatment would be to do this, this and this, and how that was really poor practice ... They're absolutely right and I think both things are right, but in terms of the assessment I suppose, we would use a different assessment process.* **Jane**

On being asked about the impact of a national curriculum on their work one team member responded: *We haven't even got a state one and we haven't even got an institutional one really!*

The plot thickens

For teachers, the professional social context or community of practice in which they make an assessment judgement is clearly a significant determinant of the outcome of the judgement process. Many other factors interplay with this social context including tacit experiences and ethical concerns. A few examples follow:

> It's been signed off by the trainee and his ... employer and there's just no way where that the equipment is even available in the workshop, yet they've been signed off as to be competent. Some examples have been in

> brake and underbody where the managers says that the person is competent to do brake drum machining and they don't even have that equipment in the workshop. So its not … its not an isolated incidence, but you know, it is a problem with one where clearly they haven't had the opportunity to work on. **Darren**

> … the sort of manager of this big organisation had resigned and other person came in their place and I guess this person's agenda was more about … ensuring the organisation coming in on budget. So almost the first thing she had done was cut back people's hours, pays, a whole range of things, so staff then were involved in pretty significant industrial action. And that all happened in the middle of this assessment process. And that really coloured … how we assessed because the individuals we spoke to were reluctant to say anything positive at all about the organisation which meant that they didn't want to talk about any training they'd done, they just … they were really concerned about that. **Jane**

> … and you can identify that a person is competent by the way they go about their work, you cannot assess every … every competency that the employer has said that person is competent with. **Darren**

Implications for national training system

This research points to a gulf between the rhetoric of the Training Reform Agenda and teaching practice. The experiences of the teachers at Lawson and Franklin suggest that if we want consistency we are going to have to do more than mandate for it. Where teams of teachers were interviewed, it seemed that not only the present social context but also the history of the team impinged on assessment decisions. The team history, moreover, had unfolded in the greater social and political story of the provider and the system in which it operates. John Seely Brown made an apt comment when he said:

> Many organisations are willing to assume that complex tasks can be successfully mapped onto a set of simple, Tayloristic, canonical steps that can be followed without need of significant understanding or insight (and thus without need of significant investment in training …
> (Brown 2000)

The roadmaps supplied with Training Packages do not take account of the rich historical, social and ethical context in which real teachers and assessors make judgements. The act of judgement is not a simplistic instrumental activity but an ethical, attentive process (Smith 1999). If we do value consistency to any degree we are going to have to supply much thicker documents to guide assessors. They will need professional development and encouragement to form the vigorous communities that are needed to normalise judgements. We will also have to address system-wide structural problems like leadership and change management if being a valued team member is a precondition for making consistent judgements. At last year's AVETRA conference, Robin Booth rightly pointed out that there are no simple answers to improving consistency in assessment (Booth 2000).

We also need to consider the possibility that inconsistency has a place in making assessment judgements. We have only to consider the dissension that takes place in the High Court to realise that highly trained and experienced professionals do make different decisions. The individuals at Lawson and the City Campus team at Franklin

knowingly took pride in making decisions that varied from those of their colleagues. We can view this behaviour as dysfunctional or we can see it as an extreme expression of professional autonomy that can also become a positive force in teaching and learning. Much previous research (Jones 2000) has shown that the perceived loss of autonomy has been seen as a problem by teachers adjusting successively to competency based assessment, national curriculum and Training Packages. Autonomy has been identified as an important condition for teacher commitment and, therefore, for effective teaching (Firestone 1993).

The National Training System has aligned with a prescriptive rather than a more individual, evolutionary approach to making assessment judgements. There is clear mismatch at present between the thinness of this approach as documented in the Training Package assessment criteria and the thickness of the learning environments in which assessment judgements are made. This dilemma needs to resolved at a national and state training system level. The resolution will not be easy because there are a whole raft of political questions involved in the problem. Whatever the solution, learners will only benefit from effective assessment judgements where there is some nurturance of professionalism in teachers and teaching communities.

Appendix one: excerpt from National Assessment Principles

These principles were endorsed by the Ministerial Council of the Australian National Training Authority on 22 May 1998:
http://www.anta.gov.au/PUBS/ARF_ARRANGEMENTS/antaass.pdf.

Principle	Essential features
8. Assessment processes shall be valid, reliable, flexible and fair	8.1 Assessment processes must cover the broad range of skills and knowledge needed to demonstrate competency. 8.2 Assessment of competence should be a process which integrates knowledge and skills with their practical application. 8.3 During assessment, judgements to determine an individual's competence should, wherever practicable, be made on evidence gathered on a number of occasions and in a variety of contexts or situations. 8.4 Assessment processes should be monitored and reviewed to ensure that there is consistency in the interpretation of evidence. 8.5 Assessment should cover both the on- and off-the-job components of training. 8.6 Assessment processes should provide for the recognition of competencies no matter how, where or when they have been acquired. 8.7 Assessment processes should be made accessible to individuals so that they can proceed readily from one competency standard unit to another. 8.8 Assessment practices must be equitable for all groups or individuals. 8.9 Assessment procedures and the criteria for judging performance must be made clear to all individuals seeking assessment. 8.10 There should be a participatory approach to assessment. The process of assessment should be jointly developed/ agreed between the assessor and the assessee. 8.11 Opportunities must be provided to allow individuals to challenge assessment decisions, with provision for reassessment.

Notes

1. The phrase Training Package is by convention capitalised when used to denote the Training Package system established by the Australian National Training Authority as opposed to all other applications of this term.

2. ANTA = Australian National Training Authority.

3. CBA = competency based assessment.

4. Bull (1985) suggested that '...competency-based vocational education may work well when applied to tasks which tend to be repetitive - ie. those in which interpretation and judgement play a relatively small part'.

5. 'Head office' refers to the main Lawson campus.

6. Victorian Office of Post-Compulsory Education and Training.

7. SDA refers to 'senior duties allowance', an old promotion position in the Victorian TAFE system.

8. Voluntary Departure Package.

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